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ABSTRACT

This essay emphasizes a need for broad-minded constructivism which posits that individuals have coherent ways of understanding their world and that these understandings are structured and hierarchically organized. The meaning behind the term "co-construction," used in psychology, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines, is analyzed. Three strategies for analyzing universal characteristics of moral development are outlined: (1) separating metaphysical assumptions from moral reasoning; (2) assessing the responses of all participants; and (3) separating, then integrating analyses of differing moral conceptions. The paper distinguishes between children's obligatory and discretionary moral judgments. (Contains 32 references.) (BGC)

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Self in Culture: Confusions of a Broad-Minded Constructivist

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Self in Culture: Confusions of a Broad-Minded Constructivist

There is often discord between proponents of Piaget and Vygotsky. Is that necessary? An answer partly depends on whether one thinks that a focus on individual psychology (as reflected in Piaget's theory) needs to give way to what Stigler, Shweder, and Herdt (1990), and many others, are calling "cultural psychology." If you think so, and if you draw on Vygotsky (as many do) to help articulate a cultural psychology, then with good reason discord follows.

This morning I would like to highlight three aspects of cultural psychology that either I don't understand, or, if I understand correctly, I'm concerned about. As I do so, I will point out what's at stake for educational theory and practice. And I shall hope to make a case -- in our limited time -- for what I'm calling broad-minded constructivism.

The first issue I'm confused about is captured by the term "co-construction," as in "the co-construction of knowledge" or "right now we all are co-constructing knowledge." At least a decade ago, the term co-construction started appearing in the literature. Nowadays, the term is used throughout psychology, anthropology, sociology, critical literary theory, and beyond. Sometimes the term is used as if the construction of knowledge happens somewhere in between us -- physically I mean. There's me, there's you. I speak, you listen, and the construction of the meaning as we understand it happens in the middle. About the distance between say the podium and the first or second row.

Do you see my confusion? In this sense, I can't escape Piaget's claim -- the claim of most developmental psychologists -- that this construction happens physically inside each person. That just seems obvious.

So cultural psychologists must mean something else by co-construction. Something like, "what I say influences you, and what you say influences me; and that we bring our new understandings to each new social interaction, such that when I say something, that something is the product of our previous interaction, and of our broader history of social interactions." If that's what cultural

psychologists mean by co-construction, I agree. I assume Piaget would agree. After all, these ideas go back to the early theorists who pioneered the social-cognitive tradition.

Think back to the writings of James Mark Baldwin in the 1890's. Baldwin (1897/1973) proposed a psychological theory of the development of self that involved three circular processes: the projective, subjective, and ejective. In the projective process the child blindly copies or obeys others, without understanding. In the subjective process, the child makes the projective knowledge his own by interpreting it. Baldwin says that in these interpretations "go all the wealth of his earlier informations, his habits, and his anticipations" (p. 120). Finally, in the ejective process, as the child begins to understand himself, so does he eject outward those conceptions onto others: Other people must be something like what I am. Now, in Baldwin's account, all three processes -- while part of a general developmental trend -- also go on simultaneously. Thus according to Baldwin there is no such thing as a child merely reproducing his or her culture. Every seeming reproduction is really the child's construction.

In some of her writing, Rheta DeVries has rightly emphasized how amazing it is that children have so many understandings of the world which are not only different from adult understandings, but which adults could hardly themselves conceive of (DeVries, 1988; DeVries & Kohlberg, 1990; DeVries & Zan, 1994). For example, why does a young child believe that the volume of a liquid depends upon its shape? We don't. Moreover, if children simply reproduced culture, there is no basis by which to explain cultural change. Thus I don't believe that the data supports the proposition that children simply reproduce culture.

Yet I assume most cultural psychologists would resist the way I'm starting to take these ideas. That is, I assume cultural psychologists (not surprisingly) would want to put more emphasis on culture. Individuals, they would say, learn from culture. Individuals reproduce their culture. As Shweder (1990) says: "Cultural psychology is the study of the way cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, transform, and permute the human psyche..." (p. 1).

Twenty years ago we had social-learning theory. Now we have "cultural-learning theory." But

what has really changed? In both theories it is assumed that if individuals are exposed to that which they then acquire, that direct learning has occurred.

Of course, the mechanism for such reproductions presumably differ. That is, I assume that cultural psychologists largely reject traditional mechanisms, such as reinforcement, imitation, modeling, or identification. If they don't reject these mechanisms, then cultural psychology looks awfully similar to an expanded notion of social learning theory. If they do largely reject these mechanisms, then these are the very issues which James Mark Baldwin, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and many other constructivists have taken up: how a constructivist psychological account (which depends on culture) provides a basis for critiquing and changing culture. And if that is what cultural psychologists mean by the co-construction of knowledge, then in these broad strokes we don't have disagreement. It becomes not Piaget versus Vygotsky, but Piaget and Vygotsky.

A lot is at stake educationally. The more cultural psychologists focus on culture, and the more they move toward a traditional social-learning theory, the more readily they will buy into the conservative pedagogy of say William Bennett (1980; cf. Wynne & Ryan, 1993; Wynne, 1986, 1989). It's a view that teachers need to tell students about our cultural tradition and our cultural knowledge, and by that means have students learn it, reproduce it. Reproduction, as in reproducing correct answers on tests, or reproducing culturally appropriate behavior. On the other hand, the more cultural psychologists focus on a constructivist psychology, the more they embrace the educational programs which DeVries has developed and written about extensively. In her work, for example, DeVries has sought to move education from a focus on teachers' instruction to students' construction. From the teachers' goal of reinforcing learning, to the goal of building on student interest. From the teachers' need for student obedience to fostering student autonomy. And from teachers seeking not to coerce students but to foster cooperation.

So, my first point is that I've been confused about how cultural psychologists understand the idea of the co-construction of knowledge. For my second point I raise a concern. Namely, when cultural psychologists focus unduly on cultural explanations, they often -- in my view -- overestimate

the amount of cultural diversity that exists, and accordingly, underestimate universal characteristics of human nature. This problem arises almost tautologically. Let me complete Shweder's (1990) characterization of cultural psychology (started above):

> Cultural psychology is the study of the way cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, transform, and permute the human psyche, resulting less in psychic unity for humankind than in ethnic divergences in mind, self, and emotion. (p. 1, emphasis added)

For example, Shweder, Miller, and Mahapatra (1987), and others, have claimed that the morality of Americans is vastly different from that of Hindus living in India. American morality, they claim, is based on rights and individualism, while traditional Hindu morality is based on duty, conventional expectations, and interpersonal obligations. As but one case in point, Shweder points out that devout Hindus believe that it is immoral for a widow to eat fish, or for a menstruating woman to sleep in the same bed with her husband -- moral judgments, Shweder says, which are far afield from those held by Americans.

Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, such accounts can be deceiving (Kahn, 1991). More broadly, I have recently suggested three strategies for analyzing universal characteristics of moral development (Kahn, 1995).

Strategy One. Separate metaphysical assumptions from moral reasoning. Here is an example. Huebner and Garrod (1991) claim that Tibetan Buddhism "presents profound challenges to those who argue for general applicability of moral reasoning theories originating in Western culture" (p. 341). They illustrate their point by providing a passage from one of their interviews with a Tibetan monk, which I quote in its entirety:

> He [the bug] went under my feet, but he did not die. Now he was suffering, wasn't he? Suffering. I figured that if I left him like that, he would suffer forever, because there was no medicine for him as there is for a human being. So I prayed ... And then I killed him with my hand, the suffering one. Why did I kill him? He was suffering. If I left him, he would suffer. So it was better for him not to suffer any longer. That's why I killed him. And I prayed ... that one day in the next life, he would become a man like me, who can understand Buddhism and who will be a great philosopher in Tibet. (p. 345)

Huebner and Garrod say that "such sensitivity to the nonhuman world leads to moral dilemmas not likely considered in Western culture" (p. 345). I find such support for what can be called moral

pluralism surprising. Have not many of us experienced moral qualms very similar to this Buddhist monk -- stepping by mistake on ants or caterpillars, and feeling remorse? The Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz does; and his heart-felt extension of sympathy to the small animals beneath his feet speaks clearly to Western audiences. More formally, the suffering of animals receives attention, for example, from Western political activists (the "animal rights" movement) and Western philosophers (Regan, 1983; Spiegel, 1988; Stone, 1986). Granted, the Buddhist monk interviewed by Huebner and Garrod advances metaphysical assumptions about karma and an after life in a way that most Western people probably do not. (I say only "in a way" because indeed many Western people -- for example, of Christian faith -- believe in some form of an after life, and that one's actions on earth affect one's place there.) But metaphysical assumptions are not the same as moral reasoning.

Indeed, it is this type of analysis that Turiel et al. (1987) provide of the anthropological data of Hindu culture collected by Shweder et al. (1987). For instance, using Shweder's own data it was found that devout Hindus believed that harmful consequences would follow from a widow who ate fish (the act would offend her husband's spirit and cause the widow to suffer greatly). Similarly, harmful consequences were believed to follow from a menstruating woman who sleeps in the same bed with her husband (the menstrual blood is believed poisonous and can hurt the husband). While such beliefs, themselves, differ from those in our culture, the underlying concern for the welfare of others is congruent with our own. The point is that moral pluralism sometimes gives way by separating metaphysical assumptions from moral reasoning based on those assumptions (Turiel, Hildebrandt, & Wainryb, 1991; Wainryb, 1991, 1995).

Strategy Two. When moral differences do seem to appear cross culturally, it is important to assess the responses of all the participants. People being tortured rarely give their consent, and seldom say that they enjoy the activity. Consider, for example, incidents which Hatch (1983) reports concerning the Yanomamo tribe in Brazil. Women were "occasionally beaten [by men], shot with barbed arrows, chopped with machetes or axes, and burned with firebrands" (p. 91). Hatch also reports that the Yanomamo women did not appear to enjoy such physically abusive treatment, and were seen running

in apparent fear. I wonder, is this situation so different from that which occurs in many Western countries? Some Western women live in physically abusive relationships; they, too, can be seen to flee in terror when their husbands approach them with the intent to harm; and, like Yanomamo women, they often return to their husbands at a later time.

Strategy Three. Separate and then integrate analyses of differing moral conceptions. While theorists may debate the scope of the moral domain, the possibilities of what counts as moral usually fall within two broad orientations (Kahn, 1991). One moral orientation focuses on what constitutes right action. In the philosophical literature, this orientation includes deontological and consequentialist theories, and their various extensions and permutations. This orientation is also central to Kohlberg's theory, and to theorists working within the domain approach to social development (Nucci, 1981; Smetana, 1995; Turiel, 1983). A second moral orientation focus on what it means to be a "good" person or on a conception of the "good" or the "good life." I think these two moral orientations are related ontogenetically, and that research programs could be patterned accordingly.

In some of my own research, I move in this direction by distinguishing between children's obligatory and discretionary moral judgments (Kahn, 1992). Obligatory judgments refer to generalizable requirements that are not contingent on societal rules or laws, and justified by considerations of rights, justice, or welfare. In turn, discretionary moral judgments are those where moral action, while not required of an agent, is nevertheless conceived of as morally worthy and admirable based on considerations of welfare and virtue. My research suggests that children as young as eight years of age distinguish moral actions on this basis. The distinction also helps account for an asymmetry between negative moral actions (do not steal) and positive moral actions (practice charity) insofar as children across ages more often conceived as obligatory the former than latter.

This distinction is also helping colleagues and I investigate children's environmental views and values (Howe, Kahn, & Friedman, in press; Kahn, 1996; Kahn & Friedman, 1995). For example, in studies that include populations in the United States and the Brazilian Amazon, it appears that children conceive of polluting local waterways as a violation of a moral obligation. At the same time, some of the

children's justifications include considerations that turn on teleological, Aristotelian-like, moral conceptions. One child, for example, said that is wrong to pollute the water because animals could die, and "without animals the world is like incomplete, it's like a paper that's not finished." This child embeds a concern for the welfare of animals in a conception of the proper endpoint or functioning of the world. Thus instead of asking which moral construct defines or is the most important to the moral life (e.g., rights, justice, welfare, virtue, or human flourishing), the distinction between obligatory and discretionary moral judgments helps cultivate analyses of different, conceptually grounded moral constructs and their relations.

Based on these three strategies, non-trivial common ground is expected across cultures. To illustrate this point, let me share a comparison between the results from two of my studies on children's environmental views and values. One population involved inner-city African-American children (Kahn & Friedman, 1995). Another population involved children in the Brazilian Amazon (Howe, Kahn, & Friedman, in press). Based on 24 of 26 measures, there was no statistical difference in the judgments of the Brazilian and African American children. Indeed, their reasoning almost echoed one another. Consider four matched pairs:

1A. [It is not all right to throw garbage in the river] because it causes pollution that is dangerous for us. Because now we have cholera, a very dangerous disease and there are others attacking us like the malaria. (Brazilian child)

1B. Because some people that don't have homes, they go and drink out of the rivers and stuff and they could die because they get all of that dirt and stuff inside of their bodies. (Houston child)

Both of the above children reason that is wrong to throw garbage in the local waterway because people might drink from polluted water, and get sick ("now we have cholera, a very dangerous disease"; "they could die").

2A. Because the river was not made to have trash thrown in it, because the river belongs to nature. (Brazilian child)

2B. Because water is what nature made; nature didn't make water to be purple and stuff like that, just one color. When you're dealing with what nature made, you need not destroy it. (Houston child)

Both of the above children base their environmental judgments on the view that nature has its own

purposes ("the river was not made to have trash thrown in it"; "nature didn't make water to be purple and stuff").

3A. Because animals have to have their chance. They also must have to live. We should not mistreat them, because if it happens to us, we don't like it. (Brazilian child)

3B. Some people don't like to be dirty. And when they throw trash on the animals, they probably don't like it. So why should the water be dirty and they don't want to be dirty. (Houston child)

Both of the above children judge as wrong the mistreatment of animals based on considering whether humans would similarly like to be treated in that way ("because if it happens to us, we don't like it"; "some people don't like to be dirty...[so the animals] probably don't like it").

4A. Even if the animals are not human beings, for them they are the same as we are, they think like we do. (Brazilian child)

4B. Fish don't have the same things we have. But they do the same things. They don't have noses, but they have scales to breathe, and they have mouths like we have mouths. And they have eyes like we have eyes. (Houston child)

Both of the above children recognize that while animals are not identical to human beings ("animals are not human beings"; fish don't have the same things we have") that both animals and people have significant functional equivalences (animals "think like we do"; fish "don't have noses, but they have scales to breath").

From this research, it does not appear to be the case that nature is a mere cultural convention or cultural artifact or social construction, as cultural psychologists might suggest. Rather, nature appears to be a part of a reality that bounds children's cognition (Soule & Lease, 1995).

I said I had three points. The first focused on what cultural psychologists meant by co-construction of knowledge. The second focused on whether cultural psychologists have within their theory the means to understand not only the variation but universality of human nature. I shall be very brief on my third point, which is this. To the extent that cultural psychologists claim that morality (like everything else) comes out of and cannot transcend culture, it follows that people within a culture (or subculture) cannot validly critique the (immoral) practices of another culture. It's a form of moral relativism which many of us find troubling. Consider the following description:

> [Chinese] guards in Gutsa Prison [in Tibet] raped nuns who were political prisoners and sexually violated them with electric cattle prods. In another prison, the chief administrator said to me, "I will give you Tibetan independence." Then he rammed the cattle prod into my mouth. When I regained consciousness, I found myself in a pool of blood and excrement and I had lost most of my teeth. (Rosenthal, 1995, A25)

In response to such situations, many people are hesitant to say "live and let live," especially since that very idea is being violated by others.

Now, the issue of moral relativism is a large issue, and beyond what we can take up today. Except it is important to note it. All too often cultural psychologists allow for moral relativism; but when push comes to shove, they back away from its implications, such as reflected in the "cultural" practices in Gutsa Prison. I would like to see cultural psychologists address this problem directly, as the problem deserves.

Conclusion. My goals have been modest. I hope to have highlighted reasons for us to be critical of cultural psychology; and thus reason to embrace what I would call a broad-minded constructivism. Broad-minded constructivism simply posits that individuals have largely coherent ways of understanding their world, and that those understandings are structured (mentally organized), structures develop, and through development structures are (often) hierarchically organized into increasingly adequate means of understanding. Research questions emerge. How is structural knowledge coordinated with merely "learned" or memorized knowledge? How is structural knowledge related to affect and behavior? How can we as educators build on the constructive activity of our students? Are there isomorphic structures between cognition and social systems? and between cognition and evolution? -- and how does each (genetics, cognition, and the social milieu) inform on one another?

It may well be that the other speakers today share these questions. If so, we are pursuing some shared visions, much as I think Piaget and Vygotsky did.

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